

## Research Article

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# “Vaporwave Is (Not) a Critique of Capitalism”: Genre Work in An Online Music Scene

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**Abstract:** Vaporwave, first emerging in the early 2010s, is a genre of music characterised by extensive sampling of earlier “elevator music,” such as smooth jazz, MoR, easy listening, and muzak. Audio and visual markers of the 1980s and 1990s, white-collar workspaces, media technology, and advertising are prominent features of the aesthetic. The (academic, vernacular, and press) writing about vaporwave commonly positions the genre as an ironic or ambivalent critique of contemporary capitalism, exploring the implications of vaporwave for understandings of temporality, memory and technology. The interpretive and discursive labour of producing, discussing and contesting this positioning, described here as “genre work,” serves to constitute and sediment the intelligibility and coherence of the genre. This paper explores how the narrative of vaporwave as an aesthetic critique of late capitalism has been developed, articulated, and disputed through this genre work. We attend specifically to the limits around how this narrative functions as a pedagogical or sensitising device, instructing readers and listeners in how to understand and discuss musical affect, the nature and function of descriptions of music, and perhaps most importantly, the nature of critique, and of capitalism as something meriting such critique.

**Keywords:** vaporwave, internet genre, genre work, critique, online music scene, narrative

## Introduction

Vaporwave is a genre of electronic music that emerged online in the early 2010s, with an aesthetic originally oriented to slowing down and looping ostensibly “kitsch” or “schmaltzy” music from the 1980s and 1990s. Unlike most internet genres, which tend to have a short lifespan, vaporwave has now existed for several years (Jimison). As this genre has developed, it has received popular, journalistic, and academic attention and, in particular, vaporwave has come to be discussed as an aesthetic and political commentary on contemporary capitalism. As such, vaporwave has been interpreted and described with reference to such topics as accelerationism (Harper, Vaporwave and the Pop-Art of the Virtual Plaza), the affect of late capitalism (Koc), repressed memory and trauma (Glitsos), nostalgia and the collapse of futurity (Carswell), and the emergence of new aesthetics of fascism (Smith).

The interpretations that have accompanied the development of vaporwave have produced definitions of the genre and its meaning in a particular fashion. Attending to these interpretations can tell us interesting things about how contemporary online music genres come to have “a point,” and to disseminate, advance and dispute that point. These interpretive perspectives work to render the genre intelligible as a consistent body of work (and a social and cultural scene), identifiable and explicable through being discussed with reference to political positions on contemporary capitalism, articulated by aesthetic means. Such discussion serves as a core feature of the dynamic for genre development, interpretation, and evaluation. Even with instances of vaporwave that do not seem to “fit the template,” the template, once established, continues to

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be mobilised as the base interpretive context for the genre. In this way, quite distinct and even contradictory musical and aesthetic forms and practices are drawn into or operate in the orbit of vaporwave.

Conversations about music often deploy it as a device to “articulate particular narratives of the social” (Whelan 1). Where vaporwave is situated with respect to critical accounts of late capitalism, capitalism thereby becomes audible, identifiable and knowable through vaporwave. We argue in this paper that this form of talk, or discourse, positioning vaporwave as an ambivalent critique of capitalism, is a central and constitutive feature of the genre, rather than a gloss on it, and that it serves pedagogical functions: as a way to understand and evaluate the genre and the scene, and as a way to understand and evaluate contemporary capitalism.

We begin this article with a brief description of the emergence and aesthetics of vaporwave. To elaborate on the discussion that frames vaporwave, we then introduce the concept of “genre work,” as an empirical investigative framework for exploring and analysing how local statements and practices work to *assert, dispute, or finesse a particular and singular meaning and coherence* for a musical style. We ground this framework with reference to the concept of genre as the preeminent classificatory mechanism for understandings of music as a cultural and social form (Hesmondhalgh; Holt). Genre work involves a wide range of practices: writing and otherwise communicating about and discussing music; producing archives and making them available; participating in collective projects which organise and evaluate releases; and, of course, the backstage creative and network labour of securing source material, putting albums and label catalogues together, designing album covers and so on. We consider these practices *as* genre work insofar as they function dialogically: making a topic out of the meaning of the genre, and responding to, inviting, or receiving further commentary accordingly.

As we define the concept, genre work serves to delineate boundaries around a genre: providing a framework for negotiations around what is *in* and *out* of the category, and also distinguishing subcategories (thus further enhancing and reifying stylistic tendencies within the genre). Genre work also thereby populates the inside of a genre. This process is ordinarily conducted by invoking a vernacular semiotics, implying a more or less explicit set of conventions (if not rules), especially regarding appropriate sound palettes and appropriate ways of treating those and linking them to images and other signifiatory forms. Genre work thereby also entails routinising practices, locations, referents and discourses as common to, and representative or emblematic of, the genre.

To illustrate and explicate this model of genre work, we then turn to representative discussions of vaporwave. We explore descriptions from a range of sources, showing how interpretations framing vaporwave as a commentary on capitalism are consistently advanced and contested. We attend here specifically to descriptions of music as a key feature of genre work (as opposed to, for example, practices such as assembling *Best of* archives), because such description is the principal means of negotiating what the genre is “about.” Moreover, the relation between written description and dialogue and the genre is especially consequential in the online contexts where music such as vaporwave circulates. This interpretive negotiation can lead to productive outcomes. It makes the genre known and intelligible to outsiders, provides resources and ideas for incoming producers, and generates discussion that leaves a trace as it echoes across virtual landscapes, thus enhancing the media footprint of the genre. In furnishing an interpretive vocabulary and idiom, it stabilises the genre, pegging the semiotics of musical strategies to extra-musical contexts in such a way as to provide more or less tacit rules to follow, bend and break.

## What Is Vaporwave?

Vaporwave first emerged online in the early 2010s. A number of platforms and websites were key to the inception and early development of the genre, notably Tumblr, Turntable.FM, and latterly, Reddit, 4chan and Bandcamp. In numerous senses, vaporwave is an internet genre: it issues from distinct libraries of music (commonly trawled from YouTube) but also mixes distinct platform-based aesthetics and cultural preoccupations. Vaporwave tracks feature samples from New Age and smooth jazz, advertising jingles, Muzak, background and menu music in 1980s/1990s instructional videos and DVDs, and power ballad and

easy listening hits (Chris de Burgh, Kenny G, Mr. Mister, Sade, Toto etc.). Audio treatments such as looping, reverb, and pitch shifting down are very common in vaporwave. Visually, vaporwave album covers typically feature 1980s /1990s home computing motifs, early digital graphic design and fonts, pastel colours, casual Orientalist appropriations of signifiers of a “futuristic” Japan, palm trees, Roman busts, Fiji water bottles, nocturnal cityscapes, 1970s and 1980s sports cars such as the DeLorean DMC-12, corporate workspaces (office lobbies and so on), and (invariably empty) malls.

Anonymity is valued within vaporwave, and some producers record under multiple aliases, but artist names are also indicative of the aesthetic. Allusions to technology and consumerism are ubiquitous. Noted vaporwave producers include 18 Carat Affair, Blank Banshee, Death’s Dynamic Shroud.wmv, ECO VIRTUAL, Infinity Frequencies, Internet Club, Lasership Stereo, Luxury Elite, MACROSS 82-99, Mediafired, Metallic Ghosts, Nyetscape, Saint Pepsi, Telepathic Data Storage, Waterfront Dining, Windows 98, and 骨架的 (Skeleton). The best-known vaporwave producers are likely Ramona Andra Xavier (Vektroid, a.k.a Macintosh Plus), James Ferraro, and Daniel Lopatin (Oneohtrix Point Never, a.k.a. Chuck Person), who produced the soundtrack for the film *Good Time* in 2017.

Stylistically speaking, vaporwave is not a radical departure from the other online genres concurrent to or immediately preceding it. David Jimison suggests that the “aesthetic of Vaporwave is similar to that of other emerging genres such as Witch House, Seapunk, and Health Goth” (14). Comparison to those other internet genres is common in the literature. Laura Glitsos similarly observes that vaporwave “forms part of a style ‘family’, comprising genres such as witchhouse, chillwave and seapunk that are popular in online forums” (100). Aside from the specifics of the musical style, vaporwave differs from these other genres to the extent that, unlike them, it has achieved (and thus far, survived) a level of prolonged popularity and visibility. In 2016, for example, the most popular genre tag on the commercial music download behemoth Bandcamp was vaporwave, with 7,710 albums so tagged (Bandcamp Daily). Awareness of the genre was amplified by much more widespread and sustained discussion in online forums and journalistic and academic circles—the kind of discussion we are interested in here. Since its inception, vaporwave has grown and developed as a genre, spawned multiple subgenres, and met a level of critical success and appeal.

At least part of what makes vaporwave entertaining and appealing is that, through the use of a number of strategies, the music seems to exhibit a kind of play with the use of established musical signifiers of irony, intimacy, artificiality and distance. “Warm” atmospheres are applied to samples which are simultaneously looped in such a way as to draw attention to their artificiality. Incongruous juxtapositions (e.g. between synchronised loops of histrionic pop samples and old mass-market advertisements) are used to jarring effect. Samples are used to “point” in certain ways, where that “pointing” is often deeply indeterminate or ambiguous. The discussion arising out of or around this ambiguity and its implications (including musical responses produced in cognisance of that discussion) has been a central feature of the consolidation and development of the genre. The source material and forms of sound treatment consistently used in the genre have facilitated discussion about the music as an engagement with capitalist aesthetics: that is, the aesthetics of music designed in and for use in commercial environments. The indeterminate and ambivalent play with samples characteristic of the genre is framed variously (and sometimes simultaneously) as satirical, ironic, and above all critical of capitalism. In the next section, we introduce the concept of genre work as an analytical means of investigating and understanding how a style of music accrues such particular meanings.

## Genre Work: How Vaporwave Becomes V A P O R W A V E

The issue of classification has been subject to extensive scrutiny in popular music studies and music sociology. As the dominant classificatory mechanism in music, genre has been at the centre of this discussion, with attention directed to how genres are constructed, and the cultural and social purposes they serve. Definitions of genre commonly hinge on how they are constituted, and how they develop. Our analysis begins with consideration of the conceptualisation of music genres, before we describe how such categories are malleable and can be *acted upon* by those invested in their interpretation and reception. We

refer first to the literature on genre so as to foreground how genre categories are both constituted by, and constitutive of, understandings of popular music forms.

Popular music theorist Franco Fabbri was one of the first writers to subject popular music genre to analysis. He writes that a music genre is “a set of musical events (real or possible) whose course is governed by a definite set of socially accepted rules” (52). Fabbri argues that there are two classes of rules governing genres—the behavioural rules (how music is performed) and the semiotic rules (the textual features of the music). In keeping with Fabbri’s approach, Simon Frith conceptualises five types of “genre rules”: formal and technical, semiotic, behavioural, social and ideological, and commercial and juridical (*Performing Rites*, 91-93). One issue, which Frith acknowledges, is that such a typology “implies a static picture of genres with clearly defined boundaries, whereas, in fact, genres are constantly changing” (93). The terminology of “rules” appears quite rigid and arose in an earlier context of recorded music production and distribution, significantly influenced by dominant (top-down) industry standards.

Other researchers prefer the use of “conventions” to “rules,” as more appropriate to the techno-cultural context of the digital age of music technologies. The concept of conventions can be traced to Howard Becker’s iconic book *Art Worlds*. Conventions are what makes art possible for Becker:

Conventions dictate the materials to be used, as when musicians agree to base their music on the notes contained in a set of modes, or on the diatonic, pentatonic, or chromatic scales, with their associated harmonies ...Conventions suggest the appropriate dimensions of a work, the proper length of a performance, the proper size and shape of a painting or sculpture. Conventions regulate the relations between artists and audience, specifying the rights and obligations of both. (29)

Such conventions, as David Brackett points out, carry a range of “connotations”:

Genres bring with them connotations about music and identity which may encode specific affective qualities such as “conformity,” “rebelliousness,” “commercialism,” “selling out,” “art for art’s sake”; and they may encode a whole variety of social characteristics including race, class, gender, place, age and sexuality. (Brackett 66)

Genres, then, are not merely bundled textual and stylistic features. The rules or conventions of genres are *not there, nor pre-established*, but rather iterative and dynamic, and articulated as genres are named (Holt) and develop over time. This is an inherently social process. To Jennifer Lena, genres cohere when “styles, conventions, and goals are crystallised so as to define musical communities” (23). Genre conventions act as expectations that members of what she calls the “genre community” discuss and negotiate (notably in determining whether or not particular works belong to the category). The conventions are not as explicit as Becker suggests in his account of art worlds, nor as directive as Frith or Fabbri imply with their use of the term “rules.” The social group cognisant of and engaged in practice with the conventions is mutually constitutive with the genre. This constitutive relation is what we mean to draw attention to when we refer to “the scene,” or more precisely, the “online music scene.”<sup>1</sup>

The purpose of this discussion of genre is to emphasise, firstly, that genres are not macro, top-down, or rigid classificatory systems, and secondly, that genre is a social process not only in its negotiation, but also in that it brings groups into being, most notably, the “genre community.” The members of this community are active parties to how the genre acquires meaning and achieves wider recognition. Vaporwave is a valuable case study to inflect this account of genre, as it arises in a socio-technological context shaped by the affordances of the contemporary internet. This context is characterised by the prominence of forums and platforms, where contributions to and exhaustive discussions of genre are publicly conducted and archived. Vaporwave emerged on (and through) such platforms, and met success in online distribution:

What makes vaporwave most distinctive is perhaps the community of artists and listeners who use the same platforms on which the music is exchanged to discuss the “meanings” of the music itself and the kinds of affective strategies involved in its production and consumption. (Glitsos 102)

<sup>1</sup> This is distinct from but builds on established uses of *scene* in research on the social organisation of musical practices. See Barna, and Bennett and Peterson, for more on online scenes, and Eichhorn and Straw for more on the concept of scene in the analysis of music and other mediated cultural practices.

In our analysis, the digital context we refer to is not background architecture, but rather plays a major dramatic role, enabling those with interest in the music to contribute to the development of the genre conventions and their shared meanings. The affordances of online platforms are absolutely essential to those interested in vaporwave coming together to discuss the genre. Moreover, online platforms, both through ease and immediacy of access and the constantly developing archive, make legible the strategies used to negotiate the borders and definitions of the genre.

We depart from Lena and Glitsos, however, to emphasise that “the community” is not unitary, or even quite *present* and *identifiable* at all times. Our position is that assumptions regarding the stability and durability of the vaporwave community are misplaced: the impression of the genre community is given by the genre work. Shifting borders around distinct social groups and actors are continually articulated and negotiated through disputation about meanings, and these social effects are a constant and important feature of genre work. Effectively, discursive, cultural, musical, and social processes advance, mediate and inform each other. These messy dynamics leave a media residue, which is the core of what coheres the genre over time, and what sediments the impression of the community for incomers. It is important to stress that the actual people who participate in genre work make up a very disparate and fragmented group with significant differences in levels of visibility and participation over time and across platforms and that the appearance of community or “groupness” is attributed on the basis of the digital trace of their interaction.

The articulation of genre involves cultural processes of valuation, but these are simultaneously processes of social articulation. The processes by which aesthetic criteria are negotiated are inherently interactional processes, directing attention to who speaks, and who does not; to claims to knowledge or position and their varying levels of success; to how momentum develops around and against dominant voices; to whose opinions are deemed consequential and so on. Drawing on David Hesmondhalgh’s critical perspective, we conceptualise genre as the “starting point for a theorisation of the relationship between particular social groups and musical styles” (32). The work of articulating the genre is the work which brings the social into view. Our argument, therefore, seeks to do justice to the constitutive social and cultural implications of discursive framing, in part by attending to the social dynamics underwriting it, occurring as it does in archived and open networked contexts.

We approach genre work as a mediated, interactional and discursive process, rather than situating the discourse, community or scene as the locus of analytical and conceptual attention. This is an epistemological rather than an ontological position, which is to say, we do not dispute the validity of terminology such as scene or community, but rather attend to how and to what such terminology comes to be applied. Perhaps the key phenomena shaping the impression of vaporwave as an online music scene is the discussion of the meaning of the genre: how (and whether or not) it is about capitalism. The ongoing discussion of how to best describe and understand the music is an inherent and fundamental feature of the genre.

There is something else to keep in mind about this, to which we shall return: the genre work around vaporwave does not only furnish the means of *making sense* of the music. In addition, it establishes vaporwave as a lens through which to hear, see, feel and understand “capitalism.” Where vaporwave is used as a vehicle to invoke and narrate capitalism, a particular construction of capitalism is thereby communicated to those who engage with these accounts of vaporwave. The ‘audibility’ of capitalism is mapped onto and extrapolated out of the semiotics of the music. In turn, an enticing community is thereby imagined; a community the reader is invited to join.

## What People Talk about When They Talk about Vaporwave

Genre work implies that the form of talk around the music is an inherent feature of the genre. The interpretations associating vaporwave with capitalism proceed primarily in registers we could describe as analogical, figurative or “poetic.” Thus, although they do not operate very effectively as descriptions of the music, this is not really a relevant shortcoming, because that is not how the contribution furnished by this framing is best assessed. Rather, their function is *evocative*: they provide a context, a space of imaginative identification, and thereby develop a shared sensibility about the world and the place of this music in it.

They mobilise a social logic of explanation: a description of the world that accounts for why and how the music is as it is. In our analysis, we do not aim, therefore, to argue directly with, or against, interpretations or definitions of what vaporwave means or stands for. We intend rather to show how these interpretations are elaborated, with an eye to the social and cultural values they express. Doing so will permit us to make and justify observations about their implications for an understanding of the development of vaporwave as an example of an online music scene, and the role played in that by the relationship between music and forms of description and discussion of that music. The question we hope to address in this section is thus: what does vaporwave “mean” in these descriptions of it, and by what descriptive processes does it come to mean that? To answer this question, we provide several representative extracts from various writings on vaporwave.

The meaning of vaporwave is routinely expressed through mobilising, firstly, its association with capitalism, and secondly, the nature and implications of its critical (or not) stance. A key feature of how assessment is then conducted and justified with respect to these topics is, thirdly, reference to its foundational albums and their producers. This is clearly evidenced in our examples below. We do not present this material in a chronological order, and we could not hope to present an exhaustive account within the constraints of this paper. While we are of necessity selective in our choice of material, the material we present is discussed here either because it is influential, or because it is thoroughly representative, thereby affording an economy of exposition.

The first feature that interpretive genre work raises regarding vaporwave is that it is a genre that is “about” capitalism. Authors describing vaporwave often turn to figurative forms to highlight how characteristics of vaporwave reference or evoke (for them) broader phenomena outside of the music. These analogical accounts are not simply descriptive in a sense that they would help readers understand what vaporwave sounds like, and identify the range of influences it (re)mixes. Instead, the metaphors that are deployed inscribe the music in a critique of something that is beyond the music genre and its direct social and cultural context.

For example, in a 2012 piece for *Dummy*, perhaps the earliest fully developed iteration of this narrative and certainly the best known, Adam Harper opens with the following:

Global capitalism is nearly there. At the end of the world, there will only be liquid advertisement and gaseous desire. Sublimated from our bodies, our untethered senses will endlessly ride escalators through pristine artificial environments, more and less than human, drugged-up and drugged down, catalysed, consuming and consumed by a relentlessly rich economy of sensory information, valued by the pixel. The Virtual Plaza welcomes you, and you will welcome it too. (Vaporwave and the Pop-Art of the Virtual Plaza)

Similarly, in a 2016 *Esquire* article, we learn that

Vaporwave arose in reaction to huge economic and social forces that are still very much a part of our lives: globalisation, runaway consumerism, and manufactured nostalgia chief among them ... although it might mimic the aesthetics of capitalism, the anti-place of the American mall, and the sounds of a tranquil permanent present, it has more in common with punk. It's political ... we're still haunted by the ghost utopias of a failed consumer paradise. (Anonymous)

In other instances, description is entirely by analogy:

A visual counterpoint might be ruin porn: photos of abandoned malls overrun with weeds and fauna. Escalators rusted to a halt. Giant skylights collapsed under feet of snow. Dead potted ferns browning in an abandoned food court. The consumer paradise of postwar America decaying into heaps of broken images and a collage of muffled sounds. (Beauchamp)

Vaporwave is further described as being critical of contemporary capitalism (where this critique, importantly, comes from “within”):

Vaporwave ... seeks to investigate capitalism “from within” instead of challenging it “from without.” By sampling, mixing, chopping, and mashing heavily commercial music and sounds from the 80s and 90s, Vaporwave questions the promise and idealism of that era. It was a time when capitalism had prevailed over communism, when greed was good and,

crucially, a time when computers became commercially available for the first time, offering a brighter and easier future. The disappointment of many at the hands of neoliberal economics, in combination with our clear failure to achieve the promised techno-utopia, gives rise to the resistance within Vaporwave. (Mangos)

vaporwave reproduces a melancholy affect through an aesthetic representation of the depthlessness, waning of affect, new technologies, pastiche, and collapse of high/low categories into consumer culture ... Vaporwave aesthetics can thus be understood as creating a cognitive map of the bleak affective space of late capitalism, inviting viewers and listeners to step inside of it and critique it from within. (Koc 40-41)<sup>2</sup>

Arising from “within” as it does, this critique comes complete with its own get-out clause or alibi, in the form of a fundamental ambivalence:

Vaporwave is a form of appropriation art. Its major exponents ... tend to work with glossy corporate mood music, dredged from the nether regions of the internet, which they then reframe (sometimes obviously looped, pitched, and screwed; sometimes not) in an intriguingly ambivalent gesture between endorsement and critique. (Parker)

vaporwave luxuriates in an unruly and ambivalent celebration-cum-critique of late consumer capitalism. (Born and Haworth 82)

It was the sound of music critiquing its own historical situation by virtue of its sheer ambivalence. (Arcand)

On first sight, it appears that, as with the conventional ironies of the last few decades, vaporwave in these accounts allows the reader the discretion to not own their own political commitments, but rather to consider the possibility of having them. Sometimes a further get-out is offered, with an element of abysgazing also, in that if vaporwave

actually *is* muzak, then it’s also “about” it, and finally the music/muzak distinction starts to dissolve and you’re left with this experience of profound ambiguity, of “both and neither,” an overwhelming sense of the critical apparatus you know and love in the process of collapse. (Parker)

The cleverness of vaporwave in such accounts is that it begins to impact upon the evaluative capacity itself, perhaps through its odd, unapologetically pleasurable transvaluation or redemption of “bad” music from the past. Vaporwave here might be a critique of capitalism, but if it is, it is the kind of critique which also undermines, or, in the interpretive idiom these writers often espouse, *accelerates*, the moment of critical insight by pre-emptively turning it against itself. Vaporwave is given the cake and gets to eat it too, insofar as it seems to have something to say about capitalism, but what it says could not be said without the commercial music it repurposes or the networked platform cultures that gave rise to and sustain it (Bandcamp, 4chan, YouTube etc.). Similarly, all the political investment is in what the music means: vaporwave as a performative investigation into the means of musical production is not generally given much airtime. The ambiguity of vaporwave is described as a rejection of binary thinking about these conundrums. Vaporwave is “meta”:

vaporwave can be heard as ambivalently dramatizing the decline of contemporary society as if accelerating it. It is a certain take on “the way things are.” Floating somewhere between satire, nostalgia and envy, it bathes in capitalist luxury and gloss, huffing the fumes of advertising, and through the prevalence of signifiers of the early internet suggests a fond yet alienated self-image of the very virtual world it finds itself occupying—kitsch, well-meaning, but inhuman, aimed at someone else, too sublime. Its medium and its message indistinguishable, vaporwave is the online underground looking in the historical mirror. (Harper, *The Online Underground*)

Vaporwave is thus understood and depicted in this writing as a *knowing* critical practice, conscious of and manoeuvring around the traps of sincerity and commercialism that plague niche online music scenes. These traps, unironically, are in part set up by discussions about music which impute critical impulses to that music and evaluate them positively (albeit selectively), but in so doing, increase exposure to the genre while consolidating accounts of what they are “about.” In one sense, then, this interpretive framework is a somewhat convoluted solution to *itself*. It gives to vaporwave its own getaway vehicle, in a broader cultural

<sup>2</sup> For the *fons et origo* on culture and late capitalism, see Jameson.

context characterised by instantaneous online exposure and a very high turnover of styles, and in a crowded cultural market with low barriers to entry. Vaporwave is presented as a way to do and rehabilitate musical sociability online, where the commentators, as savvy listeners themselves, are actively participating in this doing, and inviting readers and commenters to do the same.

Independent of the logic of description here, or the strategy imputed to vaporwave producers, we can make some general observations about this writing. It assumes that interpretation along these lines is the “proper” course of action (and/or that those releasing this music *intend* such meaning). What one is supposed to do about music, if writing or otherwise communicating about it, is to figure out what it means and take a position on that: how well it gets it across, whether or not what the music means is “good” or worthwhile or new or otherwise valuable. Part of the criteria for such assessment here, recognisable to readers familiar with the history of the sociology of culture and cultural studies (see Frith, *Cultural Study of Popular Music*; Hall and Jefferson; Harris), is in the extent to which the “meaning” extrapolated from the text accords with (the author’s) political perspectives on the broader social and cultural context. Getting this across also involves producing writing that *evokes*, just as music is assumed to evoke (affects, insights, memories and so on). Key to this process is writing that has an aesthetic or poetic sensibility, artful analogical writing that underwrites the political sensibility of the music so described by situating it in a proposed context deemed (in the writing) to be problematic: capitalism. The latter term is used in a rather vague and unspecified fashion in these accounts. Whatever “capitalism” is, it becomes a leitmotiv to describe the critical stance conveyed by the whole genre of music, a stance the writer and reader may share, and in so doing, perform their political and cultural literacy.

## Making a Scene

The idea that vaporwave is a critique of capitalism is fundamental to the genre work around the music and is consistently repeated, including where it functions as a foil. At a certain remove from the “meaning” of the music, when the story of vaporwave is told, this sense-making device remains a central feature:

Adam Harper’s article became the de facto say on vaporwave. Overnight, the genre became synonymous with anti-capitalism and corporate culture, despite the fact that that sentiment wasn’t universal within the community ... The article divided the fan base into those who agreed with the criticism and those thought it missed the mark entirely. (Pezzuti)

When *Floral Shoppe* came out in 2011, it and vaporwave as a genre got pegged, perhaps a bit too zealously, as an ironic indictment of post-capitalism, which in turn led to a gross misread of the movement’s aesthetic as purely silly. Attaching the dreaded “ironic” tag on what is often not too far off from elevator music pretty much-nipped vaporwave in the bud ... relegating it to “hipster-trash” status alongside seapunk and witch house. This is unfortunate ... because it ... is more interested in creating something beautiful than sneering at something inane. (Electric City)

Part of the genre work conducted across these instances involves forms of revaluation and assessment: of releases, of perspectives, of cultural processes and means of navigating them, of what are good and bad outcomes for vaporwave. In other examples (see Arcand), the development of new subgenres is described as a reaction to the apparent ambivalence of vaporwave:

when it comes to reactions against vaporwave, there’s no subgenre quite so outspoken as hardvapour. Barely a year old, hardvapour arose out of its parent with such formative albums as Sandtimer’s *Vaporwave is Dead*, which made a point of denouncing the meek softness and self-defeating irony of vaporwave. (Chandler)

“Telling the genre” in this way allows mapping forward and back, in that new stylistic developments can be brought in and cohered to the dominant narrative (Wieder). It also allows contributors to situate themselves within and by reference to their position in the discussion (and by inference, the scene). In the example below, the author is positioned as a kind of reactionary insider, present before the critique-of-capitalism bandwagon and privy to foundational knowledge:

Here’s the irony—Adam Harper’s insights and theories have inadvertently become part of vaporwave even if he was the one who created them, not the artists themselves. Mallsoft, DC’s futurism aesthetic, metrosong, stuff by guys like Donovan



Hikaru, a lot of that feed off of Harper’s observations of the genre. The original producers had the capitalism [sic] critique/ observations as part of their intentions, but it was never their CORE ethos and inspiration. Not at all. That’s why all the newbs who talked about Marxism theory and shit without actually knowing what the hell they are talking about drove me nuts ... Personally I’ve always taken some classic vaporwave as more of commentary on consumerism and the pitfalls of superficial, plastic existence (like James Ferraro’s *Far Side Virtual* especially hits on this... very dystopian but objectively the music is upbeat and happy, in context it’s horrofyng) [sic]. (joshuatx)

The genre work retroactively renders the genre’s development historically intelligible (with a “true” lineage, that can be elucidated by the cognoscenti, and with the possibility of classifying deviations and interpretations as legitimate, or not). Yet it also consolidates the genre by reference to a beginning, a point of historical origin. As the examples above demonstrate, “original” intentions are relevant, and “classic” or seminal albums in the vaporwave canon are indicative of such intentions. In turn, working out the original intentions entails repeating the origin story of the genre, and specifically, mobilising the vaporwave “big three”: *Floral Shoppe* by Macintosh Plus (Ramona Xavier, a.k.a. Vektroid) (released in 2011), *Far Side Virtual* by James Ferraro (2011), and *Chuck Person’s Eccojams Vol. 1* (2010), by Daniel Lopatin releasing as Chuck Person. These three releases are consistently referenced as the foundational works in the genre, as with this exchange on Twitter, initiated by @ccchristt (John Zobebe, the founder of the vaporwave netlabel Business Casual):

is it just me or is this “critique of capitalist culture” thing associated with vaporwave a joke? like it’s just a blanket term that early journalists used to give the genre a “deeper meaning” in the beginning. people who still bring that shit up hold it back imo.

In a series of responses, Finley Michaels (who releases vaporwave as Sweetheart’s Paradise Ltd.) wrote

personally i attest that to 2 of the “Big Three” early vaporwave albums having some sort of critique of capitalist culture, (*Floral Shoppe* n *Far Side Virtual*) and people continuing to push the theory that those 3 albums started the genre, like FSV being a critique of overdependence on technology & capitalism + Vektroid describing herself as an accelerationist and talking about her vaporwave was kind of an exploration on how the effects of capitalism drain ppl (like her dad, an ex-Microsoft employee) planted some seeds in vaporwave being this big anti-capitalist thing, and it kind of held up for a while before the genre became oversaturated with irony in my eyes a lot of the commercialist aes in vaporwave now is just a result of hauntology (for lack of a better term) and bc everyone else did it ofc there are still anticapitalist vw artists, but for the most part i think its just a remnant of people seeing “oh farside and floral shoppe did it” + vw can make people feel nostalgia for a time people either didnt live through or doesnt exist, thats the “hauntology” i think

All of the big three artists had previously produced and released music in other genres (digital hardcore in the case of Xavier, lo-fi and drone in the case of Ferraro, and noise for Lopatin). They were all also exploring other aesthetics at the point when their vaporwave albums were released, so it is not quite as though they invented the genre, or can be understood as custodians of vaporwave in the sense that their intentions at this point are consequential for its overall development. “Vaporwavey” albums can be identified from this period, and before, which do not feature in the narrative. For genre work purposes, references made to the big three index and reproduce a kind of synchronic snapshot. Michaels rightly points out that this is a myth of origin (“people continuing to push the theory”), even as she partially endorses the big three narrative and the critique of capitalism interpretation, albeit shifting the emphasis to another dominant frame, that of hauntology.<sup>3</sup> The appearance of the genre and the scene is given through this narrative, in much the same way that anyone expecting a history of hip-hop or punk anticipates mention of DJ Kool Herc or the Sex Pistols. This kind of narrative follows a vernacular scheme for the articulation of canon and genre that is universally familiar.

Reiterating the big three narrative (even when it is picked up with tongs, as in the above instance) is genre work insofar as it reproduces an origin story for the genre which then makes it possible to establish discussion regarding the “original” ideas: who was there at the beginning, whether or not this or that release

<sup>3</sup> Space does not permit us to attend to hauntology in greater detail. For a more substantial discussion of vaporwave and hauntology, see Glitts, and Tanner.

is a deviation, how that subgenre is a reaction and so on. While there are certainly close networks working in a sustained way within vaporwave, indeed, entire, discrete networks or sub-networks around particular labels, platforms and websites, they are not exactly *the scene*. Their coherence as such, like the coherence of the genre, is given by the constitutive repetition of these overarching sense-making devices. Such repetition provides and stabilises that which is spoken about as the genre, such that through this negotiation and its material trace, the shape of the scene or the genre community manifests itself.

## Conclusion

In this article, we set out to show that the genre of vaporwave has developed in part through the range of discursive elements used to furnish its meaning. As we have demonstrated, the success and longevity of the genre is partly due to the extensive genre work conducted by listeners and producers active in online discussions, and by journalists and academics around the musical style (which essentially involves applying certain kinds of treatments to certain sample palettes). A vast range of music is produced and made available online, most of which never encounters any kind of significant audience. Vaporwave does possess semiotic and musicological features that have made it noticeable and noticed (see for example Lorentzen; Wall). However, analysis of these features is the exception. In arguing that the range of interpretive discussion of vaporwave is constitutive of its meaning, we are arguing that vaporwave has become a genre with a dominant narrative, which is only loosely laminated to the music itself. This narrative renders vaporwave a genre that is about capitalism and serves as a (means of mobilising a) critique of capitalism. This narrative (whether or not it is accepted) has had a definitive influence on the (development of the) genre.

Vaporwave genre work involves furnishing descriptions which take as given the idea that there are straightforward or referentially accessible ways to represent capitalism critically, in sound, music, image and aesthetic. Vaporwave music is described as just such a representation: a kind of expressive idiom which variously names, plays with, parodies and subverts the ersatz aesthetics and affects of work and leisure spaces under neoliberal corporate capitalism. For this reason, it tells us much about how aesthetic, representational, and affective strategies in sample-based music are understood and described, by those interested in developing, expressing, and gesturing toward critical stances toward such spaces. It is also consequential, as an instance of capitalist aesthetics, that the critique attributed to vaporwave is situated, almost exclusively, within the stances and meanings discerned within the musical “products” themselves.

The concept of genre work elaborated here emphasises how music genres—particularly in an age when online music genres emerge and disappear within the span of a few years—come to be identified with particular elements in significant part because of the discourses and practices of those who contribute to discussing them. A case could be made, with respect to vaporwave, that early and influential coverage of the genre exerted a disproportionate effect, with unforeseen benefits and costs borne by all who were party to that. This constitutive impact on the genre is in part an effect of the levels of exposure independent and experimental music is potentially subject to. Given that so much of such music is networked in its social form, the risks of such exposure are felt more quickly, and arguably, this also impacts on stylistic development and turnover time (Jimison). In other words, the fate of genres is, through genre work, malleable. Online platforms afford the negotiation and finessing of the conventions and rules that govern genres. In turn, these negotiations are critically important to the longevity of online music genres. The discursive elements of genre work are therefore increasingly consequential.

Attending closely to how interpretations of vaporwave are negotiated makes evident two connected observations. The first is in a sense methodological, and concerns how the kind of writing and discussion presented here, as genre work about music, frames, makes legible, and constitutes its object. There are specificities to how these practices work in contexts of ubiquitous networked cultures, and there are political implications to this as a general process online, such that there is empirical and analytical value in paying attention to this writing in this way. The other might be more pertinent to readers of this special issue, and it is around the question: how do you make the aesthetics of capitalism knowable? Genre work of the kind discussed here plays an important pedagogical function (MacDonald; Woods). It can be understood as a

kind of experiment in how to identify, share, experience, and communicate about the political. One of the ways vaporwave makes capitalism known is by learning that there are vaporwave artists critiquing it. The discussion about vaporwave is, then, among other things, an effort to get the form of capitalism known, or to make vaporwave fit as an expression of a form of capitalism that can be expressed aesthetically, heard, known and *felt*. In terms of situating vaporwave within a broader discussion about capitalist aesthetics, one of the important features of the genre is that, while it is itself a representative contemporary online music scene (online, geographically dispersed, "ironic," memetic, arising from largely private participatory "playbour," with a high turnover of sounds and styles), it is in the genre work around it consistently discussed as a means or attempt to make capitalism, consumerism, and the homogeneity of corporate culture knowable, audible, and "feel-able" as objects of expressive critique.

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